

Can I Play With Madness by rkdawg

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Summary:

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Billy shrugged, and suddenly he was looking everywhere but at Steve, a furrow in his brow. A muscle in his jaw twitched, similar to how it did when the blonde was spoiling for a fight, and Steve was beginning to regret asking.

“Didn't wanna be at home. Why are you here at four in the morning?”

Steve also shrugged.

“Didn't wanna be at home.”

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

An Iron Maiden title seemed appropriate.

I haven't written in a while, so forgive my rustiness.
Hope to be posting fairly regularly. Lemme know
what you think!

Darkness surrounded Steve as he felt the walls around him with bare hands, flinching back when his fingers sunk into a cold, sticky ooze. As his eyes adjusted, his warm breath misted in the frigid air, and a shiver ran through his body. It was cold - too cold - and when he took a hesitant step ahead, something slithered around his feet. Chittering suddenly echoed around him, and a shadow moved in the corner of his eye.

"Leave me alone."

He tried to sound brave, but his voice cracked on the last note. The chittering increased, nearing closer, so he tried again.

"Stay away from me!"

Something nudged at his leg, and Steve kicked out blindly. There was a whimper that quickly turned into a snarl, and then he was lying flat on his back with sharp claws digging into his chest. Shoving at the creature atop him, he cried out in pain as teeth ripped at his flesh, blood running slickly down his wrists to stain his sleeves. Panicked, he struggled some more, striking out with his fist and landing a hit with a loud crack.

"That's it, Harrington!"

Blue eyes stared down at him, manic and intense, and the cruel grin on Billy Hargrove's face pinned him to the spot. Unable to move, Steve could only look on in confused terror as the blonde reared his clenched fist back-

Steve woke with a start, covered in a cold sweat. Rubbing at his eyes, he glanced at the alarm clock and saw that it was, once again, barely three o'clock in the morning. Letting out a shuddery breath, Steve resigned himself to yet another early start, and another day spent fighting fatigue during class.

A half hour later, and he couldn't bear to be in the silent, empty house any longer. Pulling on some jeans and an oversized hoodie, Steve ignored the mirror reflecting messy, unkempt hair and the dark circles under his eyes, and headed outside. Slamming the front door was a small, petty act of rebellion that disturbed no-one since his neighbours were a fair distance away, but it filled him with a sense of satisfaction. It was a bit of a "Fuck you" to his absent parents, to his frequent nightmares, and maybe a little to Nancy and Jonathan.

He started down the drive, not sure where he was headed, and not really caring either way. It was funny, in a way, how the darkness here soothed him while the darkness of his dreams still managed to terrify him. But the breeze that swayed the trees, and the sounds of hidden wildlife were all *normal*, and it helped to remind Steve that the cold stillness of the Upside Down was *over*.

Briefly wondering where Nancy was, if she were at home or curled up with Jonathan at the Byers' house, Steve shoved cold hands into his jean pockets and walked until the houses faded into the distance.

Had Steve known that *Billy fucking Hargrove* would be hanging out at this particular park, he probably would have taken a left at the intersection instead of right a good half hour ago. Instead, here he was standing as still as a spooked deer, hoping the bigger teen hadn't noticed him. Hargrove was turned mostly away from him, cigarette smoke enveloping him a haze under the streetlight. Steve took his chance and began to turn, but his sneakers ground noisily against the gravel road, making Billy whip around to stare right at him.

Frozen to the spot, Billy seemed to hesitate before making his way over, posture tense but his stride purposeful. When he stopped a metre or so away, the blonde took a long drag of his cigarette while giving Steve a good once-over, raising an eyebrow and huffing out a laugh. Steve bristled in indignation.

“What's so funny, Hargrove?”

Flicking the butt to the ground, Billy crushed it beneath his heel before blowing out a long puff of smoke in Steve's face. Steve grimaced, his eyes rapidly blinking the smoke away and giving Billy the opportunity to step in closer to the smaller teen. A hand shot out towards his face, and Steve waited for sharp pain to sear through his cheek and nose. The soft tug at his hair sent a burst of panic through his chest faster than the threat of violence had.

Before Steve could demand an explanation, Billy was already stepping back with a shit-eating grin.

“Nice hair, Harrington. Trying a new look?”

Steve's face felt hot as he remembered how he had looked earlier in the mirror. He hadn't bothered with his appearance since he hadn't anticipated meeting anyone at this time in the morning. Annoyed, both at this shit start of a day and the fact that he even cared about what Billy thought, Steve retorted, “You were my inspiration, actually.”

The loud bark of laughter startled him, but not as much as the genuine amusement in Billy's blue eyes.

“Not bad, pretty boy.”

Steve scowled at the nickname, but chose to ignore it for now, instead gesturing towards their surroundings with a nod of his head.

“What brings you here at-” Steve took a guess at the time. “-four in the morning?”

Billy shrugged, and suddenly he was looking everywhere but at Steve, a furrow in his brow. A muscle in his jaw twitched, similar to how it did when the blonde was spoiling for a fight, and Steve was

beginning to regret asking.

“Didn't wanna be at home. Why are *you* here at four in the morning?”

Steve also shrugged.

“Didn't wanna be at home.”

They stood in awkward silence for a minute, before Steve couldn't handle it any longer and muttered, “I've, uh, gotta go.” Not waiting for a reply, he turned and began to walk away, mentally marking this route off the list of morning walks. He didn't want to chance running into Billy on a bad day - he was surprised at how civil that exchange had just been, to be honest.

Once home, he headed straight for the shower, and if he scrubbed at his hair a little too hard, Steve refused to think about why.

Steve ran into Billy later that day, when waiting to pick up the kids. They ignored one another, though Steve could have sworn the blonde was staring whenever his head was turned away. Fidgeting, he was tempted to ask what the problem was, but thankfully Dustin's loud greeting stopped him from potentially getting into more trouble than he could handle. The boys all swarmed the car, with Dustin shotgunning as usual with a toothy grin, while Max headed over to Billy. The wary, somewhat sour look on her face indicated that she had yet to forgive Billy for 'The Incident'.

On the drive home, after dropping the kids off at each of their homes, Steve wondered when he had become so nonchalant towards 'The Incident'. It was a stupid name, but it was better than “That One Time Billy Beat The Shit Out of Steve and Almost Killed Him”. Perhaps it was because it wasn't the most crazy of things to happen back then. Or maybe Steve was just a little (worryingly) indifferent when it came to self-preservation.

Another nightmare, another early start.

Steve found himself wandering the streets again, this time staying far away from the park. He headed towards the farmlands instead, listening to the soft brays and calls of the farm animals that had settled in for the night. Just as he was contemplating turning back and heading home, a deep rumble from the distance grew louder and louder until bright lights were blinding Steve as he turned around to see a car speeding toward him.

Stepping quickly to the side of the road, he expected the driver to zoom past, but when a familiar blue Camaro skidded to a loud stop, Steve groaned to himself at his luck. The inside of the muscle car was dark but for the shadowy outline of Billy Hargrove, barely lit up from the cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. A faint scent of whiskey drifted over to him, but it wasn't overwhelming like it sometimes was. Billy sounded sober enough when he called out to him.

“Need a ride, Harrington?”

Steve was reminded once again of his recent lack of self-preservation when he found himself hopping into the passenger seat on a whim. The blonde grinned at him, and when he passed over a half empty bottle of whiskey, Steve took a long swig that made Billy's grin even wider.

“That's it, pretty boy!”

Before Steve could give Billy lip for the annoying nickname, the blonde was shifting gears, a heavy foot on the accelerator. Hastily buckling up his seat belt, Steve held onto the seat for dear life while Billy cranked the music, hoping he hadn't just made a huge mistake.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

I feel like Steve wouldn't really understand hair metal/80's metal.

Steve was doing his very best to play it cool, but inside he was freaking the fuck out. His fingers dug into the leather seat as Billy treated the quiet backstreets of Hawkins as a race-track. When they began to head back into denser territory, tall trees looming ahead and blocking most of the moonlight, Steve started to freak out for a whole different reason.

“Where are we going?!”

If his voice sounded a little higher pitched than usual, Billy didn't mention it. Instead, the blonde snorted, looking over at Steve with an 'Are you kidding me?' look on his face.

“Ain't this *your* home town, Harrington? We're going to the quarry. Obviously.”

Taking a better look outside, Steve realised that they were indeed heading to the quarry, and were in fact just about to hit the entrance which was lit up dully under the newly exposed moon. He was spared further embarrassment as Billy concentrated on finding parking with a good vantage point.

Shoulders relaxing as the ignition was shut off, Steve unbuckled his seat belt and tried to fill his space the way Billy seemed to, all long limbs and heavy presence. Picking at his jeans, Steve felt a restless energy creep under his skin as they sat there, Billy listening to one of those glam rock bands with big hair, tight pants, and possibly Satanic lyrics. The awkwardness of the situation became too much, the surreality of *listening to music in a car with Billy Hargrove* more than he knew what to do with, and Steve fumbled at the liquor bottle to take another big swig of whiskey.

Billy laughed, wrapping a hand atop the one Steve had around the bottle.

“Easy there, tiger.”

Pulling with only a small amount of force, Billy forced Steve to lean over him as he brought the bottle to his mouth. Steve's wrist bent uncomfortably as the bigger teen took a swig, pinned into place by bright blue eyes that focused on him with intimidating intensity. His breath caught in his throat when Billy pulled away with a lewd lick of the lips, and Steve's stomach felt tight with the anticipation of... Unsure of what he had been anticipating, Steve retreated back to his side of the car, unnerved and feeling like he saw something he wasn't supposed to.

Billy mercifully kept his distance after this, and Steve relaxed back against the seat. They passed the bottle between one another, taking smaller sips as the dark liquid lessened more and more, and Steve was starting to appreciate the latest band Billy was showing him, a cool sounding 'Metallica'.

The blonde was singing softly along and doing some abortive attempts at air guitar, when he suddenly stopped and blurted out, “Sorry about messing your face up and everything.”

Billy's hands dropped limp onto his lap, before rising to grip at the steering wheel, knuckles going white. He kept his gaze focused ahead, on the slowly illuminating sky and the glinting of the water below. Meanwhile, Steve wasn't sure what to say – he hadn't expected to receive an apology from Billy, not ever. He knew a little about the Hargrove home life, pieces put together from conversations with Dustin, who had gotten his information from Lucas. He wasn't exactly sure what was going on with Billy, but he *did* know that the blonde wasn't happy at home.

Billy began to fidget, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. Steve had clearly taken too long to reply when Billy muttered, “Forget it,” while reaching for the door handle.

Panicking, Steve quickly grabbed at Billy's arm without thinking.

“Wait – shit, Hargrove, give me a second, alright?”

Billy looked at the hand on his arm with annoyance, but he didn't shrug it off, instead settling back in his seat and waiting for Steve to continue. The younger teen blew out a shaky breath, running a hand through his hair while he thought of the best way to explain himself. He had never been good at this sort of thing – eloquence had always been Nancy's skill.

“Look, I get it, yeah? It wasn't cool, but...”

He trailed off, wondering what exactly he meant by that even as he tried to convince Billy of it. Steve understood change – he had been a completely different, kind of shitty person before Nancy. Nancy had said that she had only helped bring out what was already there, but he doubted that he would have changed without her as a catalyst. Perhaps Billy could change too – maybe not holding 'The Incident' against the blonde would help. Steve had to give Billy props for apologising, since he had an inkling that apologies were not typical occurrences for him.

Billy nodded, simply replying, “Yeah. It wasn't.”

They left it at that, instead taking in the rising sun as it bathed them in warm light. The alcohol made their tongues loose, more so as they finished up the bottle between themselves, and Steve learnt that Billy used to do swimming *and* basketball in California, Billy learnt that Steve had a secret love for rollerblading (he wasn't sure why he divulged that), and they both discovered a mutual dislike of Tommy H.

When Billy dropped him off at his place, Steve stumbled clumsily up the steps, making the blonde laugh. Steve flipped him off with a too loud, “Fuck you, man!” but the grin on his face almost made Billy feel better about having to go home.

3. Chapter 3

Nancy cornered Steve later that morning, ending his four day streak of avoiding her. Worried over his health, she had noticed the darkening circles under Steve's eyes, and the way he struggled to stay awake in the one class they shared. Her ex boyfriend had managed to give her the slip for the past few days, but camping out at his locker between classes had finally proven successful.

Face twisted with concern, Nancy's big blue eyes widened further when Steve stumbled slightly as he approached. The faint scent of booze floating over, despite Steve having a scalding hot shower earlier, made her nose crinkle in distaste.

“Have you been *drinking*? It's not even noon!”

Steve rubbed at his temple, feeling a headache coming on as Nancy's lips pursed, a telltale sign that a lecture was looming. Racking his mind for a way to escape, he was rescued by an unlikely saviour in the form of Billy Hargrove.

Billy sauntered over, jostling Steve with his shoulder and throwing him a sly grin that matched the glint in his eyes.

“Hey, Harrington. Coach wants to see us – probably to tell you to up your game.”

Billy's gaze was decidedly cooler when he looked over at Nancy, who had folded her arms over her chest protectively.

“Wheeler.”

Nancy's reply was a simple, “Hargrove,” but much icier, her eyes narrowed in mistrust and deep dislike. Even if she hadn't been a witness to the fight, Nancy had seen the aftermath of the beating Billy had given Steve, and she wasn't about to forgive the blonde for it. Billy doubted she would care that he was yet to forgive himself for it – for losing control like that.

Steve took his chance, excusing himself and jogging after Billy as he headed outdoors, to their fictional meeting with the coach. Once away from Nancy's view, they stopped, Billy leaning back against the school wall with his hips thrust out and his hands in his jean pockets. Steve eyed the other boy, who was staring right back at him with an unreadable expression. Shifting nervously, Steve felt a little self-conscious, and not for the first time, mildly inadequate when faced with Hargrove's Californian good looks.

Steve cleared his throat, the sound obnoxiously loud in the silence.

“Thanks. Nance means well, but sometimes she can be a bit much.”

Billy shrugged.

“Yeah, no problem. Wanna skip class?”

Steve laughed – that was the best idea he had heard all day.

“Fuck yeah.”

They ended up driving around the backstreets of Hawkins in Billy's blue Camaro, significantly slower than last time in case they needed to make a quick detour – they were supposed to be in class, after all. Steve once again wondered when *hanging out with Billy Hargrove* had become the better option to gaining Nancy's attentions, however small they were. He wasn't a fool, though, and knew that she only loved him while she was *in love* with Jonathan. It still hurt, but he didn't regret it – would never regret what he and Nancy shared.

Closing his eyes briefly, Steve was startled when he found himself parked back at Hawkins High with Billy leaning over him, a hand on his shoulder. Blue eyes studied him with an intensity that made heat crawl up his neck, and Steve let out a breath that he didn't know he'd been holding when the blonde sat back in his own seat.

“Rise and shine, princess.”

Steve groaned.

“Princess? Really?”

Billy wagged his tongue, and Steve rolled his eyes before leaning his head back against the seat and asking, “How long was I out?”

“A good hour or so. How long have you been having trouble sleeping?”

Shrugging, Steve thought back to when it all began. The nightmares started after the first incident with one the Upside Down monsters, but then he had had Nancy to hold onto, and they had settled down. The nightmares got worse as he encountered more of the 'demodogs', but by then, he had been alone. Alone in a big house with parents that spent half the time elsewhere – not that they would understand.

When he took too long to reply, Billy lit up a cigarette and muttered, “Must have been a while, 'cause you look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Don't worry, you're still prettier than most of the bitches here, princess.”

Flipping the blonde off, Steve climbed out of the car and slammed the door, irritated more than usual. He ignored Billy as he called out to him, and was relieved when he didn't hear Billy leaving the car to follow him. Steve knew he was being a little sensitive, but whenever Hargrove took shots at his appearance, it hit harder than any of his

punches had. It was stupid, but the past year had left him feeling a little insecure about a lot of things in his world.

When he barged into his mathematics class, already halfway through, Steve muttered an insincere apology and took the closest available spot. Doodling in his notebook, not even pretending to listen to the teacher, he ignored Billy's entrance some five minutes later. Steve wished that he could as easily ignore the way he could feel the blonde watching him from across the room, gaze heavy and meaningful in a way he didn't quite understand.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm taking liberties with the timeline here, but trying to make it somewhat realistic. I'd actually forgotten about college until this chapter!

Now that school was over for the day, Steve was feeling a bit stupid for getting so upset earlier. Billy stared at him while they both waited at the middle-school car park, and Steve wondered how someone could manage to make simply leaning against a car seem both dangerous and inviting. His stomach suddenly felt tight, and he put it down to envy. When the blonde stayed by his car, finally looking elsewhere, Steve refused to acknowledge the disappointment he felt.

After dropping Lucas at home, and then Mike and Will at the Byers' house, Steve headed over to the Henderson's residence. He always took Dustin home last, a little nod to their closer bond in the group, and the kid lapped it up. Dustin was currently talking animatedly about a 'hoarder dragon' that Max tricked into giving over its gold, and Steve had to admit that Dungeons and Dragons sounded kind of fun.

Pulling up outside Dustin's house, Steve bit the bullet and asked something that had been plaguing him most of the day.

“Hey kid, so... Kind of a weird question, but you don't think I'm, like, pretty – right? I mean, a guy's *handsome* not pretty.”

Dustin blinked up at him after a moment of hesitation. He looked at Steve, assessing with a critical eye, before nodding to himself and giving his verdict.

“I’d say you’re a Luke Skywalker on the scale of pretty to handsome.”

Steve smiled wryly.

“But I’m no Han Solo, is that it?”

Steve waited until Dustin was at his front door, waving cheerily back at him, before making his way back home. He flicked through the channels to see if anything was worth watching on television, but the afternoon time slot primarily targeted young children fresh out of school. Bored, he looked through the fridge and kitchen cabinets, noting that he should probably spend the grocery money his parents left him.

“Pasta for dinner, it is,” he muttered, getting the ingredients out and onto the counter for later.

With a sigh, Steve decided to make an attempt at doing some of the homework he had been neglecting. Setting his books out on the kitchen table, he managed to write down a page of legible notes before his eyes started to droop. Leaning his forehead on the notepad, Steve was startled upright by the shrill ring of the phone.

Expecting it to be Nancy, since no-one else really called except maybe Dustin, he was surprised to hear Billy on the other end.

“Hey, princess. You still mad at me?”

Steve rolled his eyes, hoping Billy could somehow hear it over the phone.

“How did you get my number? And *don't* call me that.”

Billy spoke slowly, as if Steve were stupid. And maybe he was, because he had a point when he said, “How many of you Harrington's are there in the area?”

“Whatever. What do you want, anyway. I'm kind of busy here.”

Hargrove's chuckle sent a shiver down Steve's spine, and he felt keenly aware of every little noise he could hear over the line. Leaning against the nearest counter, he rubbed at his eye with one hand and tried to cut the conversation short.

“Busy doing homework. So, it's been *real* nice talking and everything-”

He was interrupted mid-sentence.

“Yeah, about that. Know how we have to pair up for the English assessment?”

Steve drew a blank as he tried to remember the last time he had that class.

“Err, no?”

Billy snorted.

“You would if you didn't always fall asleep in class.”

“What's your point, Hargrove?”

Billy's voice went all honeyed, soft and sweet in the way Steve had heard it go when he was trying to get a girl to agree to something she really shouldn't. His throat went dry – he'd never been at the receiving end of this, after all. Steve could see why a good girl would go bad for Billy.

“Let's partner up. I'll even let you choose the book we've gotta write about.”

Scoffing incredulously, Steve idly twirled the phone cord around a finger.

“Why the hell would I partner up with you? And why do we even have to do an assessment near the end of school?”

The sweetness was out of the blonde's voice as quickly as it entered it.

“Look, princess, if you don't want a letter of recommendation, that's up to you. But I wanna get out of this shit hole of a town, and college is my best bet.”

“Jeez, Hargrove, I'm just so concerned about your future.”

Billy sighed loudly.

“C'mon, Steve. I'll even tone down the whole 'princess' shit. Whaddaya say?”

Steve pushed away from the counter in a sudden burst of energy.

“Ugh, sure, whatever. If it gets you off my case.”

Billy whooped in triumph, and Steve laughed even as he had to hold the phone away from his ear. It was short-lived, however, as Billy's voice quickly dropped to a near whisper.

“Shit, I've gotta go. Catch ya tomorrow, Harrington.”

A click later, and the phone cut out.

Waking up in a cold sweat and his heart stuck in his throat was nothing new, but the clock reading five o'clock was – Steve actually felt more refreshed thanks to the extra two hours of sleep. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, he decided to return to the homework that he'd left scattered on the table downstairs. He had been doing fairly okay in his classes while with Nancy, mostly thanks to her help, but he really needed to knuckle down now that he was on his own again. He wasn't sure if college was even a viable option for him, but he also wasn't sure he wanted to end up with working for his dad.

Steve wondered what his parents were up to – he wondered why they'd had a kid if they weren't even going to be home most of the time. He missed his maternal grandmother, who had doted on him while he was growing up, and felt a stab of grief as sharp as if she had passed away yesterday and not five years ago.

Billy settled himself next to Steve in English, legs spread obscenely wide and forcing other students to squeeze past him or make a detour. Steve noticed fresh wounds on Billy's face, a cut lip and slight bruising along one cheek, and he wondered who the blonde had pissed off this time. He didn't have time to ask when the teacher began outlining the assessment, saying it would be 'good practice for college'. She looked bored as she explained further, handing out a checklist to each student while she kept glancing at the clock, as if she couldn't wait to be out of there. When the teacher instructed them to discuss the assessment with their partners, Billy turned to Steve.

“So, I was thinking 'North and South' by Gaskell. We studied her at my old school, so I should still have some stuff on it at home.”

Steve was a bit taken aback at this enthusiasm, and it must have shown on his face as Billy looked away as if embarrassed. Steve could have sworn there was a blush on the blonde's cheeks, but he didn't call him out on it. Instead, he raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips playfully.

“I thought you said I could choose the book.”

Billy grinned, straightening his back and seemingly confident once again.

“I'll say anything to get what I want, princess.”

Steve didn't doubt it. They made plans to meet at Steve's after dinner, when Max's mum would get home from work. He hadn't known that Billy looked after Max after school, just assumed that he drove her to and from school and that was it, but it made sense. He had never actually seen Billy out much until it was dark, and even then, Steve had kept his distance.

When the bell rang, the two of them ended up walking the same way up until they reached Steve's locker. Billy gave his back a hard slap as he continued on to his own locker, making sure to give him a wink as he yelled over the swarm of students in the hall.

“I’ll see you later, pretty boy! Don’t miss me too much!”

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

A shorter chapter than I'd have liked but it was best to cut it off where I did. ;)

It was around quarter past seven when Steve heard the low rumble of the Camaro pulling up the drive. Making his way over to the front door, he paused to take a quick look in the mirror, straightening his fresh change of clothes and pushing back a few errant strands of hair from his face. When he realised what he was doing, as if it were a girl he was about to meet with, Steve frowned and stepped away from the mirror as though burned.

It's just Billy Hargrove, stupid.

Throwing open the door, feeling strangely nervous with his stomach doing somersaults, Steve sucked in a quick breath at how close Billy was as he leaned against the door frame. He, too, had also freshened up, the faint scent of soap and cologne mixing headily with cigarette smoke, and he had traded in his denim jacket for leather. There was his usual smirk in place, though Steve could feel a similar nervous energy thrumming from the blonde as Billy looked over his shoulder into the house.

Finally noticing the book bag under Billy's arm, Steve remembered that they had work to do. Stepping back hastily, almost tripping over his own feet, Steve stammered, "Ah, hey, um – come in." He accidentally slammed the door shut when the blonde slid past a little too close, making Billy eye him in amusement, and Steve flushed at his obvious lack of chill.

They stood there just looking at each other for a minute, both shifting from one foot to another as they tried to figure out how to act in this new situation. Clearing his throat loudly, Steve gestured towards the kitchen before leading the way, hyper-aware of how close the bigger teen was as he followed. Heading over the fridge, he offered Billy a drink.

“We have pop, and uh, beer. You want a beer?”

Billy was looking around him at the spacious kitchen and breakfast space with open curiosity, and Steve felt a little embarrassed, even though he knew he had no control over the obvious affluence of his family. He cleared his throat again when he blonde didn't answer.

“Hargrove? Er, Billy?”

Intense, startlingly blue eyes returned to his, and Steve swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry.

“Sure. Thanks.”

Grabbing two beers with hands that slightly shook, Steve busied himself with finding a bottle opener while telling himself to 'get his shit together'. He rummaged through the drawers, beers dangling precariously from one hand, getting increasingly frustrated at his lack of success when a jangle nearby alerted him to Billy's approach. The blonde was flipping through a set of keys as he brought a hand up to cover his own. Using a key-chain bottle opener, he uncapped both beers, his hand gripping tightly over Steve's as he held them steady. When he pulled away, bringing one bottle to his lips for a taste, Steve

felt that *electricity* that he had discussed with Dustin all those months ago.

Before he could be thrown into a fit of panic at this sudden realisation, Billy was pulling away and sitting down at the table. He was quick to get out the contents of his bag, and when he pointed towards the opposite chair with his beer, Steve obediently took a seat. Flipping through an old copy of 'North and South', its pages highlighted with notes along the sides, Billy suggested, "We should focus on the Industrial Revolution aspect – there's a lot of that in this."

As Billy rattled on more information, sounding remarkably similar to how Nancy did whenever she became engrossed in her school work, Steve felt his brain fly elsewhere as he gulped down his beer. He was too busy focusing on the way Billy's fingers slid across the pages of his book, and the way his gold necklace swung against his bare chest as he hunched over in his seat.

"Earth to princess. I'm not doing all this myself, so listen up."

Steve sighed, but he nodded as he picked up his own copy, borrowed from the school library that afternoon. By the time he got up to the third chapter, he could feel wrinkles setting into his brow from all the frowning he was unwittingly doing – the language wasn't as bad as Shakespeare, but there were a lot of unfamiliar terms that Steve kept having to (reluctantly) ask Billy about. Eventually, the blonde swiped his book and threw over his own dog-eared one, muttering, "These notes should help." Steve felt a warmth both upon his cheeks and in his chest, and he vaguely wondered if a straight guy should be feeling so calm about all this.

It was nearing 10pm and three beers later by the time they began to lose steam. Billy didn't seem to be in a rush to go home, though, and Steve remembered when they had met at the park early that one morning. Billy had said that he didn't want to be home. Topsy, not wanting to be home alone any longer than necessary, and feeling an intense urge to keep Billy nearby despite knowing what a bad idea it all was, Steve blurted, "Do you like hot tubs?"

Billy raised an eyebrow, not sure where Steve was going with this.

"I guess? Why do you wanna know?"

Steve scratched the back of his neck, kind of embarrassed now but having to follow through since he brought it up.

"I've got a hot tub. I think we've studied enough for tonight – wanna check it out?"

A slow grin grew on Billy's handsome face, a sparkle in his eyes.

"We gonna do this naked, or are you gonna get me some swim shorts?"

6. Chapter 6

Heading upstairs and into his room, with Billy following a little too closely behind for comfort, Steve rummaged through his drawers for spare shorts. From the corner of his eye Steve could see Billy taking a good look around his room from where he leaned against the door frame, hands shoved into his jean pockets. Grabbing the first pair of shorts he could find, Steve walked over to the blonde and pressed them against his chest with a hesitant smile.

“Bathroom is down the hall to the right. You can get changed there.”

Billy leered at him, and Steve flushed hotly despite himself.

“Shame... Thought you'd give me a show right here in your room.”

Rolling his eyes, Steve pushed the bigger teen out into the hall and shut the door in Billy's grinning face. Hurriedly changing, while anxiously scanning his appearance in the mirror and feeling a little inadequate, Steve flung open his bedroom door and almost ran into Billy who had his hand raised about to knock. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the blonde nearly naked (in fact, he'd technically seen him nude on *many* occasions thanks to basketball, though he had made a conscious effort not to look below the waist) but in his house, and in front of his room, *in his clothes* – somehow it all combined to send a shock of awareness through him.

Willing himself not to get hard, which was really difficult considering Billy was looking him up and down with an intensity that made his

throat dry, Steve stammered, “Uh, let's head outside, yeah?” He cursed to himself as he led the way, trying desperately for the cool 'King Steve' to make an appearance, but maybe that side of him truly had left for good. Maybe he just didn't know how to 'not care' so much anymore, not when he knew there was so much to care about.

Steve was pulled from his thoughts when the coolness of outside suddenly nipped at his skin. Breaking out into a half-run, he made a beeline for the hot tub, which he had thankfully turned on prior to getting changed. The loud hum of the machine and bubbling water promised warmth and relaxation, and he stepped into the water with a happy sigh. Billy was a bit behind him, having stepped into the kitchen momentarily, and the two open beers explained why. Steve accepted a beer with a soft, “Thanks,” and found himself watching with great interest as the blonde joined him in the tub. Billy sat down close enough that when he spread his legs, their knees touched, and Steve tried not to jump out of his skin.

Steve took a long swig of his beer, trying desperately to think of something to say. It occurred to him that he didn't really know that much about the other teen – he was Max's step-brother, he was frustratingly better than him at basketball, chicks loved him even though he treated them like shit, he drove way too fast in a way too cool car, seemed to be under the influence half the time, smoked like a chimney, didn't like to be at home, and he was surprisingly studious (at least when it came to English literature). Steve took another drink after listing these 'Billy Facts' in his head, because maybe he *did* know a fair amount about the blonde. He wondered what Billy knew—or thought he knew—about him.

“So, princess...”

“Hmm?”

Billy laughed, and Steve flushed when he realised that he had answered to the nickname so readily. He was about to tell him to knock it off when he froze in place, breath caught in his throat. Billy was sliding over, crowding him against the corner of the tub as he finished off his beer in one final gulp. The blonde threw the now empty bottle over into the bushes, and Steve couldn't help but begin to complain when Billy grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled him into the roughest, down right dirtiest kiss Steve had ever had. It was all tongue and teeth, their wet bodies sliding together obscenely, and the groan Billy made when Steve bit down into his lower lip had his hips jerking in response. Steve's beer bottle floated aimlessly in the water, having dropped it mid-kiss. When they separated, breathing heavily as they looked into each other's eyes, the blonde said it best.

“Fuck.”

Steve felt giddy, aroused, and a little terrified. Billy looked about the same, even as he leaned in for another kiss. Just as their lips met, Steve heard a sound he'd hoped would remain only in his nightmares. He jumped away from Billy, looking around the yard with wide eyes.

“Did you hear that?!”

Billy simply looked confused, and more than a little annoyed at the interruption.

“I didn't hear anything, princess. Probably just some animal.”

When nothing but the hum of the tub and the hoot of an owl filled the silence, Steve began to relax. He smiled sheepishly at the blonde, and welcomed Billy's next kiss with enthusiasm. When he thought too much about the fact that they were two guys, and that it was *Billy Hargrove*, who was about as unstable as he was attractive, Steve blocked it out by focusing on the pleasure of having the bigger teen pressing up against him, and his large hands running up and down his sides. Steve groaned as Billy mouthed along his neck, biting down into the flesh and sucking a bruise onto his skin. A determined hand began to creep into his shorts when he heard the sound again. And it was closer.

Turning his head, Steve saw the dark but unmistakable outline of a 'demogorgon' near the trees bordering his house. It was a Stage Five, something Dustin had taught him, but just as deadly as an adult even if it simply looked like a large dog from a distance. It hadn't noticed them yet, but it wouldn't take much – a sudden movement, or loud noise would do it.

“What the fuck is that?”

Cursing as Billy's natural reaction to the monster drew its gaze right upon them, Steve clambered out of the tub, pulling the confused blonde with him. Running to the house, almost slipping a few times as water dripped from them onto the tiles, Steve wrenched the door open and shoved Billy inside, only just managing to slam the glass door shut as the demo-dog rammed into it. The glass cracked, somehow not shattering on impact. Steve knew it wouldn't take long before the glass caved in.

Running to the kitchen, Steve grabbed two of the biggest knives he could find and passed one to Billy, who was looking at him like he'd grown two heads. When he handed him a frying pan next, and

started moving furniture around to slow down the monster's path, Billy had had enough. Steve was shoved up against the pantry, with a wild-eyed Billy demanding to know what was going on. Steve didn't have time for this; the sliding door was just about to break.

“Look, I'll tell you after we fuck this thing up, okay? I promise.”

Trying to convey as much honesty and sincerity as he could into both his voice and expression, Steve was relieved when Billy backed down with a cautious nod. Just in time, too, as the loud shattering of glass drew their attention to the back room. Steve whispered, “Just follow my lead – I've fought them before,” and he ran upstairs as quietly as possible. Stopping at the top of the stairs, he pointed down the hall.

“Go wait behind that corner there. I'm going to lure it in, make it chase me down towards you, and then I want you to hit it as hard as you fucking can with that frying pan. Okay?”

Billy looked at Steve like he was crazy, but he thankfully didn't argue, taking his assigned spot without issue. Steve felt like he *was* crazy, playing bait and trusting Billy to save his ass, but a part of him knew the blonde wouldn't just sneak out and leave. At least, he thought he knew.

Sounds of wood breaking and splintering got louder and louder as the demo-dog made it through the kitchen and into the living room. As it approached the foot of the stairs, claws clicking noisily on the tiles, Steve mustered up all his courage and whistled. It pierced through the air like a gunshot, and the monster launched itself up the stairs, slipping clumsily on the steps. Steve booked it down the hall, praying to any and all gods out there that today wasn't the day he died. Running around the corner where Billy hid, he shouted, “Now!” Billy

clenched his jaw and put his back into a heavy swing, the frying pan connecting with the creature's head with a sickening crunch. Not even a whimper was heard – it was out cold, now lying sprawled out on its side.

“What the fuck even is that?!”

“Fuck, we've gotta kill it. Do I just stab it?”

“I don't fucking know!”

Billy glared back and forth from Steve and the monster, but when he saw Steve's conflicted, queasy face, he stepped between them, blocking the *thing* from older teen's view. He muttered, “Don't look,” and squatted down, shoving his knife deep into the thick skin of the monster's throat. When the rise and fall of its chest slowed to a stop, Billy stood and faced Steve.

“It's dead now.”

“...Thanks.”

But before Billy could begin interrogating him, Steve ran past him and down the stairs. Following him into the kitchen, which no longer had a functional table or any chairs, Billy leaned against the counter while Steve grabbed the phone and dialled someone. This someone turned out to be the sheriff's office.

“Hopper! It's Steve Harrington – no, everything is *not* okay. I just had one of those fucking demogorgons *in my house*. It attacked me, and it attacked Billy, and now Billy has to know about the Upside Down. Fuck!”

Steve and Hopper spoke for a few more terse minutes before he hung up angrily. He wasn't pissed at Hopper, but at the situation. He could feel Billy's eyes on him, and Steve sighed in resignation. Gesturing towards the living room, which hadn't been too badly damaged, they took a seat next to one another on the couch. While Steve was wondering how the hell he was going to start the story, Billy took initiative.

“So... What's the Upside Down?”

Notes for the Chapter:

So this story changed dramatically from my initial plans, but it is now certainly more exciting!